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ABSTRACT

This presentation discusses basic cultural and educational values in the Afro-American community, setting these into the context of international African culture, both before and after the period of the European slave trade. Contending that blacks historically have been given "a second-hand education that was designed for other people," this keynote address further states that when servants are educated, they are educated to serve. Therefore, a new, self-reliant approach to education that encourages black students to rediscover, and take pride in, their African heritage is called for, in order to restore their confidence and identity. Contrary to a prevailing misconception, the Africans were a highly cultivated people for many years before their contact with the western world. The city of Timbuktu is cited as the cultural and intellectual center of West Africa, prior to the Moorish invasion in 1591. Accordingly, part of the "education for a new reality" involves teaching people of African descent where they have been and what they have been, and thereby to locate themselves, as a people, on the map of human geography. Education, when it is honest, has but one purpose: to empower students, and to train them to be responsible handlers of power. (TE)

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EDUCATION FOR A NEW REALITY IN THE AFRICAN WORLD

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BY

JOHN HENRIK CLARKE

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My subject, "Education For A New Reality In The African World." was not casually chosen. I have spoken on this subject, or some aspect of it many times over the years. I have exhausted arguments in favor of the subject, without losing my passion for it.

Some recent events have renewed my anger about this subject because we still do not understand the international importance of education. When properly taught, Education like history, is a compass that people use to find themselves on the map of human geography. It is the clock they use to tell their historical time of day. The proper education of a people tells them where they have been and what they have been. It tells them what they are and where they are. But, most importantly, a proper education tells them where they still must go and what they still must be.

There is a real crisis facing Black educators in the United States. From the beginning we were being given a second-hand education that was, originally, designed for other people. In this regard we did not face reality then and we are not facing reality now.

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Powerful people cannot afford to teach powerless people how to take their power away from them. True education has but one honorable purpose, and one alone, everything else is a waste of time...That is to train the student in the proper handling of power - at the very least, power over him or herself.

Our present dilemma in education is old, and it started, in part, with the second rise of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when our history was locked into what Professor Ivan Van Sertima has referred to as a 'Five-Hundred-Year Room.' The Europeans not only colonized the world, they colonized information and, of course, they colonized education, especially the text books that are used in the schools. Europe was their home, the U.S.A. and parts of Canada were included, as their outer colonies: The rest of the world was declared to be their, "Servant's Quarters."

The change and the challenge in education today is that there is a revolt in the, "Servant's Quarters," throughout the world. In this nation of emigrants, we African-Americans are the emigrants who came to this country against our will. We are the only people who were actually invited here. The nature of the invitation need not be discussed at this point. However, there were no unemployment problems, there were plenty of jobs - with no pay.

When servants are educated they are educated to serve - never to hold power. Our dilemma in education today is how do we work our way out of what Professor Van Sertima calls the, "Five-Hundred-Year Room." This period is covered by what I have called the, "Slavery Curtain." We have to look on the other side of this curtain to see what kind of people we were before the advent of slavery.

In his book, "Tom-Tom," the writer, John W. Vandercook, has said:

> A race is like a man,
> Until it uses its own talents,
> takes pride in its own history
> and loves its own memories,
> it can never fulfill itself
> completely.

This, in essence, is the basis of the education for a new reality in the African world...We must teach our people to use their own talents, and take pride in their own history and love their own memories. Our fulfillment will come with the restoration of our confidence and self-reliance.

Because of slavery, its aftermath, and massive pro-Western propaganda in the mass media, we forget some positive things that we need to remember. For most of thetime that we as a people have been on this earth we were not slaves. In fact, Europeans enslaved other Europeans for a much longer period. Feudalism and serfdom in Europe was a form of slavery that lasted longer than the time when we were held in slavery.

Contrary to a misconception which still prevails, the Africans were familiar with literature and art for many years before their contact with the Western world. Before the breaking-up of the social structure of the West African states of Ghana, Mali and Songhay, and the internal strife and chaos that made the slave trade possible, the forefathers of the Africans who eventually became slaves in the United States lived in a society where university life was fairly common and scholars were beheld with reverence.

There were in this ancestry rulers who expanded their kingdoms into empires, great and magnificent armies whose physical dimensions dwarfted entire nations into submission, generals who advanced the technique of military science, scholars whose vision of life showed foresight and wisdom, and priests who told of gods that were strong and kind. To understand fully any aspect of African-American life, one must realize that the African-American is not without a cultural past, though he was many generations removed from it before his achievements in American society commanded any appreciable attention.

I have been referring to the African origin of African-American literature and history. This preface is essential to every meaningful discussion on the role of the African-American in every major aspect of American life, past and present. Before getting into the main body of this talk I want to make it clear that the Black race did not come to the United States culturally empty-handed.

I will elaborate very briefly on my statement to the effect that the forefathers of the Africans who eventually became slaves in the United States once lived in a society where university life was fairly common and scholars were beheld with reverence.' During the period in West African history - from the early part of the fourteenth century to the time of the Moorish Invasion in 1591, the city of Timbuktu, with the University of Sankore in the Songhay Empire, was the intellectual center of Africa. Black scholars were enjoying a renaissance that was known and respected throughout most of Africa and in parts of Europe. At this period in African history, the University of Sankore

at Timbuktu, was the educational capital of the Western Sudan. In his book, "Timbuktu the Mysterious," Felix DuBois gives us the following description of this period:

> The scholars of Timbuktu yielded in nothing, to the saints in their sojourns in the foreign universities of Fez, Tunis and Cairo. They astounded the most learned men of Islam by their erudition. That these Negroes were on a level with the Arabian Savants is proved by the fact that they were installed as professors in Morocco and Egypt. In contrast to this, we find that the Arabs were not always equal to the requirements of Sankore.

I will speak of only one of the great Black scholars referred to in the book by Felix DuBois. Ahmed Baba was the last Chancellor of the University of Sankore. He was one of the greatest African scholars of the late sixteenth century. His life is a brilliant example of the range and depth of West African intellectual activity before the colonial era. Ahmed Baba was the author of more than forty books; nearly everyone of these books had a different theme. He was in Timbuktu when it was invaded by the Moroccans in 1591, and he was one of the first citizens to protest this occupation of his beloved home town. Ahmed Baba, along with other scholars, was imprisoned and eventually exiled to Morocco. During his expatriation from Timbuktu, his collection of 1,600 books, one of the richest libraries to his day, was lost.

Now, West Africa entered a sad period of decline. During the Moorish occupation, wreck and ruin became the order of the day. When the Europeans arrived in this part of Africa and saw these conditions, they assumed that nothing of order and value had ever

existed in these countries. This mistaken impression, too often repeated, has influenced the interpretation of African and African-American life in history for over four-hundred years.[1]

After the 'middle-ages' Europeans had to come out of a five-hundred-year room of self-doubt and restore their confidence. This was done mainly at our expense and we will never fully understand this until we have some, 'White Studies Programs.' We do not know that the enslavement of our people led to the economic recovery of Europe and the making of the modern world. This is explained very clearly in a book on the subject, that is a classic, it is called, "Capitalism and Slavery." The author, the late Eric Williams was once a Howard University Professor. When he died he was Prime Minister of Trinidad. That story is too well known to be retold here.

Let us digress for a moment to point out reoccurring deficits in our education. Dr. Eric Williams who died a few years ago was one of the best historians in the Caribbean Islands and a scholar who commanded both national and international respect. We and our children should know about him and the many books that he has written. His book, "Capitalism and Slavery," published over two decades ago, in 1944 is still an important work on the commercial aspects of slavery and how this sad business started.

The last major book by Eric Williams is, "From Columbus to Castro: The Story of The Caribbean, 1492-1969."[2] The sad admission here is that most Black educators have not read this book and some who have read it have not understood its importance. Part of the education for a new reality is that we must teach our people how to reclaim

what has been taken away from them. This is a form of Nationalism that I have called, "The Essential Selfishness of Survival." It is the responsibility of the Black educators to ask and answer this question. "How will my people walk on this earth?" Furhter, it is the responsibility of the Black educator, at this juncture in history to answer in the manner and words of Malcolm X:

> My people will walk this earth
> with freedom and dignity -
> and by any means necessary.

I have been emphasizing the fact that we have not studied our selves enough in order to come out of our dilemma of dependency. I also want to emphasize that we have not studied other people enough because we are not the only people who have had a dilemma and have had to come out of it. Especially we need to pay attention to the challenge of the nineteenth century and how the African men and women, all over the world, met that challenge. Properly seen, this may have been one of the greatest centuries of our existence as a people.

In the West Indies and in South America it was the century of massive slave revolts and resistance. In Brazil, African slaves had brought into being two states - Palmares and Bahia. One of these states, Palmares, lasted for more than one-hundred years. It was the century of the Haitian Revolution, the most successful slave revolt in history.

We have talked too much about slavery and oppression without understanding how we resisted both of them. Our legacy of resistance in the Americas and in the Caribbean Islands lasted well into the

twentieth century.[3] My point here is that we have not made the best use of this legacy as educators. In this paper, my intent is to look at our past history in order to make an assessment of our present dilemma and estimate, or prophesy, what our future as a people can be. Throughout history, we have always had some difficulty in making a distinction between fantasy and reality. The basis of our dilemma in the past and in the present is that we are the victims of a misconception of history, andlike most people, we are poor students of history.

In our search for definition, direction an a way to relate to ourselves and the rest of the world, we need to find out where we have been and what we have been, in order to understand where we are and what we are. This is only half of the answer, and not the most important half. The most important thing that we have to do in our search for direction and a definition of ourselves, is to decide where we still must go and what we still must be. I have said many times, and it is worth repeating again, figuratively we as a people need to find the clock that tells us our special historical time of day, and we need to find the compass that we can use to locate ourselves on the map of human geography. Our major problem today is that we are telling time by someone else's clock, and we are following people who do not know where they are going. The late Malcolm X, has said, that some of us in leadership are 'crawling back to the plantation.' Figuratively speaking, those of us who are crawling back to the plantation do not know that our former slavemaster is confused and in flight from the plantation, and that the big house, where he had once lived so luxuriously at our expense, and the slave quarters have fallen down. If we are looking for a leader we must look among ourselves. This is the basis of our dilemma. How do

we explain ourselves to ourselves?

In his essay, "The Basis of African Culture," the Caribbean writer, Timothy Collender has said:

> What we do for ourselves depends
> on what we know of ourselves, and
> what we accept about oruselves.

The title of my talk provokes a question, "What shall we tell our children?" What shall we tell them about our history in this country and in the world? How do we explain slavery to them and how do we tell about the great nations, empires and cultures that we built and maintained for thousands of years before slavery? How do we tell them what happened tothose great nations, empires and cultures? How do we tell them about how and why the slave trade came and why we were more affected by it than any other people? How do we explain the contradiction between grandeur and decline?

There is a trend of humanity and naivety that runs through our lives as a people. We have always been hospitable to strangers - nearly always the wrong strangers. We open the door for the slavetraders without knowing what we are doing. We did not know the temperament and the intentions of European people, when the slave trade started in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. We do not know it now. How do we explain this to our children? - After we have explained it to ourselves. How do we explain that period of history when European people began to colonize the world, and the information about the world? When we look back and see this slavery curtain, can we look behind the curtain? Can we look at that period in history when the curtain was not there?

We need to locate ourselves, as a people, on the map of human geography. We need to take an inventory of our wares in the market place of the world and ask: How much are we worth to the world, and how much are we worth to ourselves? Who do we need and who needs us? We need to now question all terminology that relates to Africa and its people. Black or Blackness tells you how you look but it does not tell you who you are. Wherever we live on the face of this earth we are an African people. There was a need, in most of us to go through a period of time, shouting that we are Black and Beautiful. In this country we shouted: NATIONTIME, because we realized that we are a nation within a nation, searching for a nationality. There are some questions that we should have asked before this shouting. What are the components of a nation? If we do not have them, how soon can be get them? Can we regain the nation building skills we lost in slavery and during the colonial period? Can we understand that it is a terrible thing for a people to be out of power so long? Can we understand that the lack of power is our greatest problem? This is a world problem among African people. It is a problem in Pan-Africanism that we talk much about without understanding it. We are a world people and we should begin to assume world responsibility.

In our, "Education For A New Reality," we need to break out of the parochial bind and see ourselves as a world people. We need to build a worldwide African connection, be it ever so difficult, and we need to get it across to African people that wherever they are, the piece of geography called Africa is the property of every African on the face of the earth and we all have some responsibility to it. We

need to bring about an effective Pan-African marriage between Africans in the West and Africans on the continent. Africans are oversold on the talent of the European, especially in science and technology. Africa is the world's richest continent and the storehouse of more untapped riches than any other place on earth. In many ways, Africa, above all other continents, has been favored by nature itself. The thieves who stole Africa have propagated the concept that Africa is miserably poor and is dependent on Europeans for its survival. The truth is the contrary. We need to ask some questions about why Africa is so rich while its people are so poor. We also need to ask why so many third-rate Europeans are getting high salaries for work in Africa when first-rate Africans in the United States and the Caribbean Islands are being refused for some of the same jobs.

When we look at ourselves as an African world people, we again need to take an inventory in the United States, the Caribbean Isands and in South America, especially Brazil. There are approximately two-million African people in the Western Hemisphere. There are millions of African people in the Pacific Islands who we seemed to have discovered only a few years ago. There are two specific African nations, New Guinea and Vanuatu, at the United Nations, right now. These people are totally indistinguishable from African people everywhere. The population of Africa has been estimated to be four-hundred million for well over fifty years, indicating a population stagnation that all of us know is not true. Properly counted, we may be the second, or at least the third largest ethnic group on the face of the earth. This being so, why then do we keep thinking of ourselves as a minority. In the world we are not a minority.

We need to understand what education is all about. I repeat, powerful people never educate powerless people in how to take their power away from the. Education, when it is honest has but one purpose. That is to train the student to be a responsible handler of power. Beginning with power over one's self and responsibility for one's actions. This is a highly scientific and technical world and we need to be educated towards this reality. No one is excited about African people shouting that they are "Black and Beautiful." White people will concede this without difficulty. The world is ruled by power and not by Blackness. We need to know that being 'Black and Beautiful,' means nothing unless ultimately we are Black and Powerful.

This is an old issue that started in the nineteenth century with the awakening of Prince Hall, Frederick Douglass, the rise of the independent Black Church and other social independent Black movements. Martin Delaney, Black Activists, men and women - Harriett Tubman, Soujourner Truth - are some of the finest and clearest voices that we have produced outside of Africa.

Near the end of that century, on January 5th, 1881, Elmont Wilmot Blyden, made his famous inaugural address at Liberia College entitled: "The Aims and Methods of a Liberal Education For Africans." In his address he called attention to the fact that we would have to work for many yeqrs to come, without the understanding of the mistakes we made in education, and are still making today. He said we strive to be those things most unlike ourselves, and that we feed grist into other people's mills, and, of course, nothing comes out except what has been put in and that is our great sorrow. Elmont Wilmot Blyden was not only ahead of his time - to a great extent he was also ahead of this time.

Fourteen years later, Booker T. Washington of Tuskegee University would make his famous Cotton Expedition Speech. It was misunderstood then: it is misunderstood now. It was not a compromise, it was an act of strategy that worked on some levels and backfired on other levels. Strategy is never perfect. Early in this century we entered into an educational debate over who was right, W.E.B.DuBois or Booker T. Washington. DuBois' approach was toward a liberal and political education: Booker T. Washington's was toward an agricultural and industrial education. We were wrong in assuming we had to choose, one or the other, because both DuBois and Booker T. were right. These men were not fighting each other, they had a different approach to an educational subject that was, basically, the same. In the final analysis they were both talking about self-reliance.

Education for a New Realtiy is the education that must be used in the maintenance of a nation. This means we must establish a set of semantics in dealing with education and with ourselves. Early in this cnetury we had a debate about whether we should be called Africans, Coloreds or Negro. We didn't settle that debate. We grudgingly accepted the word Negro. Then we changed that to another inadequate word, Black. Black tells you how you look, it does not tell you who you are. The proper name of a people must relate to land, history and culture. A people is not a color. The Caribbean writer, Righard Moore, in his book, "The Name Negro Its Origin and Evil Use," has said:

> Slaves and dogs are named by their masters
> free men name themselves.

We are an African people. That was what we were when they took us out of Africa: That is what we still are. Wherever we are on the face of this earth. We are an African people. We are not a minority. We accepted this status because, too often, we follow people who do not know where they are going and who hand out negative classifications to other people to make themselves feel good. Our writer, Lerone Bennett, Jr., has said: "We have been named - we must become namers." We must also become thinkers and begin to think of ourselves as a world people, with world responsibilities, capable of building a new humanity for ourselves and for all people.

Another factor in the education for a new reality is the new status of women and the respect we should give to them. We will survive with our women as partners in our struggle - or we will not survive at all. I will conclude this paper by quoting some lines from the poetry of four different African-American female poets.

In her poetry, Mari Evans repeatedly, asks us to - "Tell the Truth to the people." She implies that if you give a people a light they will find their own way.

Paule Murray, now the Reverend Doctor Paule Murray, in her poem, "Dark Testament," says:

> Freedom is a thing like Amber wine,
> that lures man down a path of skulls,
> where they kill the dreamer - but
> not the dream.
> The dream is always the same,
> The dream is about freedom.

This is what the new education is about, or should be about. Freedom from dependency, freedom from fear, and freedom to choose your own way of life when it differes from that of others.

Carolyn Fowler, of Atlanta University, in her poetry says:

> African people throughout the world need
> to get used to seeing each other again,
> and to get reacquainted with each other personally
> and remove the strangeness that has grown-up
> between them over all the seas and all the centuries.

In her classic poem, "For My People," Margaret Walker has called on us to:

> Let the beauty full of healing
> and a strength of final clenching
> be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood.
> Let the martial songs be written,
> let the dirges disappear.
> Let a race of men now rise and take control.

We know that the rulers of the world have worn out the carbon copy of their originality, if they ever had any. And this is the period of the changing of the guards in the power establishment of the world. And that the new race of men will come from those who have been oppressed.

We who are men of vision understand that we will not go into the twenty-first century with our women holding a status of inequality. We need their minds and their energies functioning in the enterprise of our freedom. So we say to Sister Margaret Walker-Alexander:

> We are the New Men
> and with our women at our side,
> as equal partners in our enterprise
> of freedom, We are Brepared to Take Charge.

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